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The Reconstruction of Mark Twain: How a Confederate Bushwhacker Became the Lincoln of Our Literature

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Review

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Fulton, Joe B. *The Reconstruction of Mark Twain: How a Confederate Bushwhacker Became the Lincoln of Our Literature.* Louisiana State University Press, $34.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-3691-1

The Civil War Influence on an American Literary Icon

In his 1953 book *The Civil War*, the southern writer James Street counter-intuitively selected Mark Twain as “My Favorite Confederate." Few others have made strong connections between Twain and the Southern Confederacy. Now, in a refreshing monograph, Joe B. Fulton, a Twain scholar who is a Professor of English at Baylor University, takes Samuel Clemens’ brief 1861 service in the Missouri Confederate militia as his point of departure for a study in intellectual biography. He traces Clemens’ thinking about the sectional conflict, race, and politics through the 1860s, to trace stages by which the young Confederate came, as Mark Twain, to adopt a Unionist, non-southern, and racially enlightened identity. Along the way Fulton offers many informative and thoughtful details about different stages and aspects of Twain’s career.

Fulton recognizes that skeptical readers may doubt that Twain’s Confederate identity was ever firmly established to begin with. From clues about young Clemens’ outlook in the Secession Crisis, he argues that it was serious while it lasted. Fulton goes on to probe all sources from Twain’s Nevada and Califor-nia years to detect his political animus. He points out, for example, that in 1862 letters Twain, rationalizing his Nevada Territory location as outside “the United States," still identified with the Confederate Missouri forces and called the Union Army the “enemy" (58). Mostly, Fulton finds expressions of a bias, sometimes subtly expressed, against Republican politicians and racial minorities.

Those findings are important, but they warrant careful distinctions. Most of Fulton’s data, realistically assessed, would characterize Twain as a “prejudiced Border-State conservative" rather than a “proslavery southern nationalist." Even

so, a critical reader may concede at least two significant points to Fulton: (1) If events had happened a bit differently in 1861, Sam Clemens might have become a persevering and even efficient Confederate soldier, as some of his Marion Rangers comrades did. (2) He did emerge with some sense of having participated in the experience of Confederate defeat—even though, for him, the defeat had been pretty much complete before the first battle of Bull Run.

The “reconstruction" that Fulton documents best is Twain’s political transition from the Democratic to the Republican camp, particularly during his stint in Washington in the late 1860s. Although dependent on Senator William M. Stewart, a relatively conservative Republican, Twain continued to speak his own mind. In spring 1867, he still expressed doubts about the constitutionality and feasibility of the Congressional Reconstruction program (140-42). A year later, praising Representative Thaddeus Stevens, he advocated the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson before the incident that finally precipitated it (144-45). By that time, Twain had become a Republican, but he continued, Fulton points out, to be “a critic of power" in politics (153).

Fulton is especially interested in the changes in Twain’s racial attitudes. He emphasizes that the young Twain expressed strong race prejudices and the mature Twain combatted them. In his chronological account, though, he finds few signs of that particular change while it was in process. He may be overlooking one possible transition sign: In summer 1867, as a tourist in Venice, Twain engaged in conversations with “a cultivated negro, the offspring of a South Carolina slave," who was working as a tour guide there. (Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*) In his two pages about the guide, Twain expressed both his accustomed claim of white superiority and some of the equalitarian considerations that would distinguish his later writing.

Fulton treats Twain’s life and writings after 1870 generally as a single extended period. In consequence, he does not write much about Twain’s and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel *The Gilded Age* (1873), and does not fit it into a distinct chronological stage. That seems surprising. The Gilded Age contains much source material about one of Fulton’s main topics: Twain’s changing opinions about Reconstruction politics. The lacuna may leave some readers feeling that what might have been the penultimate chapter is missing from the book.

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Fulton reflects, thoughtfully, ways in which Twain's early Confederate experience may have influenced the humorist's mature outlook. He particularly suggests that the early loss of a cause Twain had embraced left him with a lasting detachment from regimes and causes in general, and with skepticism about war and military activity. Consequently, he approached those topics with cynicism and addressed them primarily through satire. As Fulton points out, Twain wrote his war memoir, "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," for a magazine series that consisted mostly of generals' analyses of large-scale, decisive campaigns. He wrote to accentuate the contrast, and his discordant contribution did not appear in the four-volume final product, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (1887-88). It may never be possible to demonstrate Fulton's causal thesis about the effect of Twain's war experience on his later career and philosophy—but the thesis does have some plausibility, and it may afford useful insight into Twain's thought and the persona he presented.

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